RPG Reload File 010 – 'Fighting Fantasy: House Of Hell'

Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where we open random doors hoping we aren't scared to death by what we find inside. Each week, we take a look at a game from the App Store's past and poke it with a stick to see what happens. It's a bit of reflection, a bit of revisiting, and perhaps a bit of an excuse to have fun with an old friend. As this week obviously demonstrates, all kinds of RPGs are welcome here, and I'll do my best to make sure we get a good variety chosen from the selection. Once per month, you guys get to choose what I play and write about, which should help that balance stay intact. The next reader's choice is in **RPG Reload 013**, so get your vote in as soon as possible by leaving a comment below or dropping into the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#) on the forums. You can also feel free to leave your thoughts, comments, and suggestions in either place, since playing games is more fun when you can talk about it with your friends.

We're rolling along into the second week of the **RPG Reload**'s month of Hallowe'en celebrations. Last week, [we looked at](#) the quirky cult classic *Cthulhu Saves The World* [($1.99)](#), which takes a tongue-in-cheek approach to its horror themes. This week's game, *Fighting Fantasy: House Of Hell* [($5.99)](#), tries to play things a bit more seriously, though since it was originally aimed at teens and young adults, there's only so far it can go. Still, it's probably one of the earliest examples of a horror-themed RPG, and if that's not worth saluting in the month of October, I don't know what is. I'm

sure some eyebrows are arched ever-so-slightly at this choice, but as I've mentioned before in various reviews of gamebooks, these were the original handheld RPGs, albeit with a few more random choices and adventure elements than we typically associate with the genre today.

Let's set the stage first. It's 1984 and writers/game designers Ian Livingstone and Steve Jackson are working as hard as they can to capitalize on the sudden enormous success of their hit collaboration, *The Warlock Of Firetop Mountain*. That book had successfully kicked off the series known as *Fighting Fantasy*, a variation on *Choose Your Own Adventure* books that infused the concept with contributions from pen and paper RPGs. Now creating books individually, Ian Livingstone is mostly putting out more titles in the fantasy genre, while Steve Jackson is juggling traditional fantasy in his *Sorcery!* [($4.99)](#) series with other genres like science-fiction, as seen in *Starship Traveller* [($5.99)](#). A horror buff from childhood, Mr. Jackson decides his next gamebook would pay homage to the comics and films he grew up on. *House Of Hell* debuts in a shorter form in *Warlock Magazine* that year, with an expanded version becoming the tenth *Fighting Fantasy* novel, released in 1985.

Looking back, Jackson specifically cites three films as inspiration for *House Of Hell*. First, the Peter Cushing/Christopher Lee vehicle *Dr. Terror's House Of Horrors*, specifically the short about the possessed hand. He also mentions the 1968 film version of the Dennis Wheatley novel *The Devil Rides Out*, also starring Christopher Lee. Finally, he credits the well-known *To The Devil A Daughter*, yet another Christopher Lee-starring movie based on a Dennis Wheatley book. These movies all have a common theme, aside from the obvious Christopher Lee connection. They're all movies that deal very specifically with the occult sub-genre of horror, which was riding high at the time thanks to popular movies like *The Exorcist* and *Poltergeist*. You will find some of the typical classic monsters in the *House Of Hell*, such as vampires and zombies, but the main plot is very much focused around Satanic rituals and demonic possession. It's frankly a minor miracle the book was released

in the USA with only a minor modification to the title, becoming *House Of Hades* but otherwise retaining all of its content.

The basic story has you driving your car late one night in the countryside when, of course, you have some mechanical trouble. Spotting a lone house with a light on near the side of the road, you decide to go and ask to use their phone because you've apparently never seen a horror movie before. Unfortunately, you won't find anyone doing the Time Warp when you arrive, but you will most likely be introduced to the lord of the manor, the Earl of Drumer, who looks an awful lot like Peter Cushing. He seems an affable enough fellow at first, urging his butler Franklins to bring you all sorts of delicious foods and drinks. Whether you partake or not, you'll soon find the inevitable sinister side to this mansion, and though you may wish only to escape, you'll find the only way to do so is to take down the Master himself.

Steve Jackson was fond of coming up with special rules for his books to help them stand out. In the case of *House Of Hell*, it was Fear. At the beginning of the game, you roll your usual *Fighting Fantasy* stats like Skill, Stamina, and Luck, but you also roll for another stat called Fear. This stat represents your character's limit for dealing with the horrible things they come across in their travels, and when it's exceeded, you are scared to death and the game is over. This was incredibly novel for its time, and I'm sure it inspired more than a few horror games to follow. Another way this game stood out was in allowing you to return to previously visited locations and, if you had the right items or information, uncover new choices. This was a lot harder to pull off on paper than digitally, sometimes simply giving you a page number to turn to when the time was right, other times involving giving you a certain number that you would then subtract from an otherwise unremarkable option to find a new section to turn to. Rather impressively, it works smoothly for the most part, with only a couple of areas where continuity errors happen as a result.

Also unusual for a *Fighting Fantasy* book, you start your adventure with nothing, not even a weapon, giving you a penalty to your skill until you can

scrounge something up. The non-linear nature of the game gives you a lot of chances to get yourself into trouble, although you're at a much higher risk of getting scared to death than you are of running out of stamina. *House Of Hell* has a reputation as one of the most difficult of the *Fighting Fantasy* books, and it lives up to that. There's a very particular path you have to take to win, but discovering that path requires a great deal of exploration, which takes a terrible toll on your Fear. There are also two areas of the house that, should you enter, you cannot escape from. It's equal parts adventure, puzzle, and RPG this time around. You'll probably need to make a map and you'll certainly need to check everything thoroughly, risky though that may be.

Along the way, you'll find plenty of details to add to the back story, along with a lot of scares, cheap or otherwise. The illustrations are provided by Tim Sell, and they are actually pretty grotesque and spooky if you consider the audience this was aimed at. It's important to remember that much of Western society was in the grip of moral panic over the idea of secret Satanic cults at this time, so packing all of this stuff into a book that was supposed to sit beside *Island Of The Lizard King* [($5.99)](#) on store shelves was playing with fire. Eventually, one image was pulled from the book, though it's obviously restored in the iOS version because we aren't scared of silly imaginary threats anymore. I remember finding this book pretty scary when I was younger, but I was also terrified of Mark Hamill at that age, so I'm not sure how useful an indicator that is. Steve Jackson's writing frequently lacks subtlety, and that definitely comes through in this book, though there are a few parts where his descriptions are detailed and disturbing enough to still get to me. There's a great little twist at the end of the adventure, giving the whole thing a satisfying finish that many *Fighting Fantasy* books lack.

Gamebook fans tend to be divided on *House Of Hell*. Just about everyone agrees the theme and overall story are fresh and interesting. The gameplay, on the other hand, gets a lot more criticism. As I mentioned, this is a very difficult book, and a lot of people don't like how it comes by that difficulty. The Fear mechanic, while very unique, discourages exploration, since you

have only the smallest margin for error if you mean to beat the game, even with a lucky initial roll for the stat. I personally like the Fear mechanic because it gives the adventure a huge amount of tension, particularly when you start approaching your limit, but things would be undeniably better if you had a bit more rope. Then there's the matter of the two areas where, regardless of your choices, stats, or rolls, you will die.

They're stupid "gotcha" traps, and once you've worked out that you really can't escape, you'll never fall for them again, but it's extremely annoying until you've worked that out. Oh, and luck be with you if you don't choose to make a map. It shouldn't be this easy to get lost in a house, but it is, and the Fear penalty for walking in the wrong door can easily put you over the threshold where the game becomes unwinnable. Nevertheless, I still have a good time running through this gamebook. Perhaps it's because I know where all the dumb traps are, or maybe just that I can still grasp some of the fear I used to feel thumbing through it at night under the covers with a little flashlight after my parents had turned the lights out. It's one of those special *Fighting Fantasy* books that stands out from the rest of the pack, whether you love it or hate it.

One thing is certain, however. If you're going to play *House Of Hell*, the digital version by Tin Man Games is the way to do it. Not only are you spared the necessity of real dice, you also don't have to engage in any of the myriad calculations and note-taking to keep track of what your character knows. The black and white art is rendered in color, which adds quite a lot to its creep factor in most cases. You also get the standard choice of difficulty settings, but in a funny switch from the norm, it's actually easier to cheat your way through the physical book than the digital version. If you're just reading the paper book, you can choose to ignore it when your Fear stat reaches its limit, but even on the lowest difficulty, you are still quite capable of being scared to death in the digital version. You can give yourself all the stamina in the world, but you can't reduce your level of fear. Perhaps that's for the best. Since release in early 2013, the app has seen a couple of

updates to squash bugs and reduce the image compression, and it still works nicely on iOS 8.

In my opinion, *Fighting Fantasy: House Of Hell* still makes for a great playthrough around this time of the year, even if it's not nearly as scary as it was when I was in elementary school. It's brutally hard, but I think that kind of fits a horror game. What do you think? Please leave your comments below, or drop into the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#) to share your thoughts on this game or any other RPG thing that tickles your fancy. We're all friendly, just don't drink the white wine and keep away from the cheese. Don't forget to let me know which game you want to see me play in the next reader's choice, while you're at it. Right now *Baldur's Gate* [($9.99)](#) is commanding an impressive lead, but you still have time to turn that around if you want. I'll be back next week with another **Hallowe'en RPG Reload**, so try not to get scared to death in the meantime. Stay spooky, and thanks for reading!

Next Week's Terrifying Reload Hint: *I feel so alone, going to make a big old pile of them bones.*